

CERAMIC REVIEW

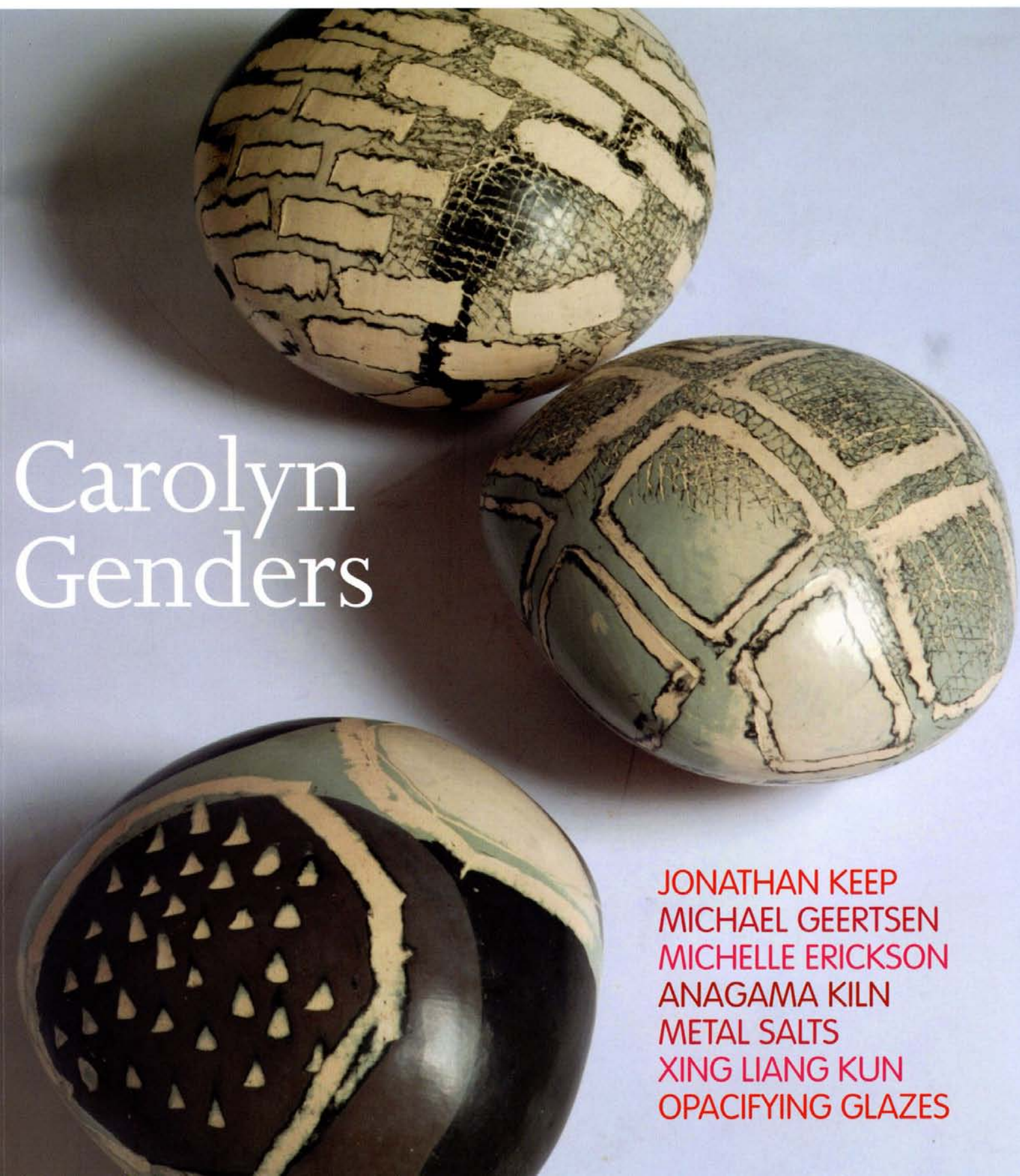
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Carolyn Genders



JONATHAN KEEP
MICHAEL GEERTSEN
MICHELLE ERICKSON
ANAGAMA KILN
METAL SALTS
XING LIANG KUN
OPACIFYING GLAZES



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Conflict Ceramics

Robert Hunter identifies parallels between early anti-slavery wares and Michelle Erickson's contemporary ceramics.

Functional ceramics have often served as a medium for conveying social messages. One of the more unique instances relates to the historical ceramics that championed the anti-slavery cause beginning in the late eighteenth century. These wares were employed by the abolitionists in England and subsequently in America and bear witness to one of the most grievous social ills in western history.

The history of English abolitionist ceramics starts with Josiah Wedgwood, who was associated with many leading British anti-slavery supporters, including William Wilberforce and Thomas Clarkson. Wedgwood's jasperware medallion, first produced in 1786, depicts a kneeling slave in chains under the inscription 'Am I not a Man and a Brother?', and was adopted on 16 October 1787 by the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery – of which Josiah Wedgwood was a member – for its seal and motto. The rendering continued to be the dominant one for the anti-slavery cause and was used by a number of other potters well into the 1840s and 1850s. Various abolitionist societies commissioned these socially charged wares to be sold at special meetings and fairs to help raise money. In 1807 slave trading was abolished throughout the British Empire and in 1833 slavery itself was finally outlawed. British potters, however, continued to supply abolitionists with ceramics, as slavery in America did not end until the conclusion of the Civil War, in 1865.

MODERN THEMES Inspired by these historical objects, Michelle Erickson evokes similar themes in her recent ceramics. At first glance, her elegant creamware forms appear to be visual reminders of days gone by, but just beyond the glittering surface is her response to the harsh realities of global conditions that have changed very little in the exploitation of the poorest populations in the quest for rich natural resources.

This commentary comes in the guise of eighteenth century English ceramics forms – including plates, tureens and teapots – to advocate social awareness of modern child soldiers and slavery whereby millions of children are forced to work and fight in appalling conditions, to become prostitutes and to commit murder. Drawing directly from the political ceramics produced in the late eighteenth century to aid the abolitionist movement against Anglo-American slavery, Erickson displays considerable technological skill in constructing a visual parallel to the protests of the past.



The imagery for her decidedly modern version derives from recent pages of *The New York Times* in which stories of horrifying conditions in the world are juxtaposed with advertisements of extravagant luxury items. By reminding us how diamonds and other precious jewels are illustrated next to depictions of child soldiers – just as earlier abolitionists called for the boycott of East India Sugar, a company dependent on slave labour – Erickson illuminates the exploitative practices of powerful corporations and adds her voice to those who eschew the so-called 'blood diamond trade'.

The most complex piece is *Front and Centerpiece*, an adaptation of an extravagant form originally created to grace the dining tables and sideboards of eighteenth century genteel society. First produced by mid eighteenth century English porcelain manufacturers and subsequently by the creamware industry, these intricate centrepieces often used



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simulated shells to serve as receptacles for a variety of gourmet candied fruits and relishes known as sweetmeats.

Like the originals, Erickson used moulds to create the repetitive mollusc shells needed for the tiered arrangement but she also inserted other moulded elements that convey a bitter pun: throughout the arrangement are applied casts from the ammunition of a variety of firearms, including AK-47s and handguns of different calibres, to provide both structure and ornamental elements. It might take the casual viewer a few moments to comprehend the connection between these 'shells' of military necessity and those typically used to serve sweetmeats. Instead of sweetmeats, however, Erickson's stylised scallop shells bear images of lavish gems and African child soldiers. Her tragic rendering of the stark, hand-modelled figure of the young African soldier at the top – which in the eighteenth century prototypes is

usually a representation of a Greek or Roman god or goddess – provides an exclamation point to the unforgettable message she conveys with the sculpture as a whole.

The plight of the child soldier is manifest in other tableware forms. An ornate pair of tureens carries similar imagery, as does a remarkable teapot. Through her precise and thoughtful use of images of coloured jewels and a bandolier of rifle ammunition, Erickson mimics the eighteenth century fashionable decorative treatment known as chintz, named after the popular, brightly coloured Indian fabrics. Chintz decorated creamware was all the rage for upper level English society and Erickson's ability to camouflage her social content in this style is impressive. Further highlighting her composition are moulded elements taken from toy ammunition bandoliers that have been coloured with gilt. The figural finial of the teapot is also an



appropriation of a typical eighteenth century device but her putti, unlike their benign classical counterparts, are fully equipped with the accoutrements of modern warfare.

A more traditional means to convey overt political messages in the eighteenth and nineteenth century ceramics were large English creamware jugs. Erickson's versions provide a canvas for present-day concerns with the harsh problems of child soldiers and the blood diamond trade. *Timepeace* is a monumental translation of a creamware Liverpool jug.

Erickson first threw the large jug and finished it in a clear glaze before applying a series of decals to simulate transfer printing. Her intent was to juxtapose images of child soldiers with the very luxury items that precipitated the economic realities underlying this tragic social consequence. The images of gemstones and the large Rolex watch were appropriated from advertisements commonly found in many luxury magazines. The rifle of the soldier in its centre serves as the hands of the clock. Erickson further embellished the jug with hand-enamelled images of children dressed in military garb and carrying automatic weapons. A bandolier of bullets criss-crosses the central composition, adding a nefarious decorative element. The jug was further highlighted in a period fashion with gilt decoration.

INJUSTICES Well known for her historical references and her technological exploration of seventeenth and eighteenth century Anglo-American ceramics, Erickson has used her considerable repertoire to produce a series of works that protests injustices around the world in a fashion not that dissimilar from that used by potters to protest against the institution of slavery in our own recent history.



The perception of these ceramics has yet to be fully realised; a number of these have gone to private collections but many museums have shied away from the harsh social commentary expressed in this body of work. It is hoped Erickson's powerful ceramics will make us mindful of the many injustices in the modern world and in so doing will remind us that, without action, history all too often repeats itself. **CE**

3 Sugar bowl and cover, earthenware with gilt decoration, England, 1820-30, H13cm
 4 Figural group, porcelain, England, c.1820, H16cm 5 Michelle Erickson - *Front and Centerpiece*, porcelain with gilt and enamel decoration, 2005, H61cm 6 Michelle Erickson - *Timepeace*, creamware with gilt and printed decoration, 2005, H51cm

Further Reading Sam Margolin, 'And Freedom To The Slave: Antislavery Ceramics, 1787-1865', in *Ceramics in America* (Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Chipstone Foundation, 2002), pp.80-109; Jonathan Prawn, Glenn Adamson, Katherine Hemple Prawn and Robert Hunter, *The Very Man for the Hour: The Toussaint L'Ouverture*

Portrait Pitcher, in *Ceramics in America*, op. cit., pp. 110-29

Robert Hunter is editor of *Ceramics in America*, published by the Chipstone Foundation of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and is a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London
Photography Gavin Ashworth

Michelle Erickson was commissioned by Jamestown 2007 to design and create a ceramic work of art to be presented to HM Queen Elizabeth II as the official gift during her historic visit, 4 May 2007

Email mepottery@cox.net

Web www.michelleericksonceramics.com

